

Factors to Consider: Developing Adult EFL Students' Speaking Abilities

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Learning to speak a foreign language requires more than knowing its grammatical and semantic rules. Learners must also acquire the knowledge of how native speakers use the language in the context of structured interpersonal exchange, in which many factors interact. Therefore, it is difficult for EFL learners, especially adults, to speak the target language fluently and appropriately. In order to provide effective guidance in developing competent speakers of English, it is necessary to examine the factors affecting adult learners' oral communication, components underlying speaking proficiency, and specific skills or strategies used in communication. This paper explores these aspects so that teachers can more effectively help adult learners develop their abilities to communicate in the target language.

Speaking a language is especially difficult for foreign language learners because effective oral communication requires the ability to use the language appropriately in social interactions. Diversity in interaction involves not only verbal communication but also paralinguistic elements of speech such as pitch, stress, and intonation. In addition, non-linguistic elements such as gestures and body language/posture, facial expression, and so on may accompany speech or convey messages directly without any accompanying speech. In addition, "there is tremendous variation cross- culturally and cross- linguistically in the specific interpretations of gestures and body language" (Brown 1994:241). Furthermore, different cultural assumptions about the purposes of particular interactions and expected outcomes of encounters also affect communication. Consequently, due to minimal exposure to the target language and contact with native speakers, adult EFL learners in general are relatively poor at spoken English, especially regarding fluency, control of idiomatic expressions, and understanding of cultural pragmatics. Few can achieve native-like proficiency in oral communication.

EFL learners need explicit instruction in speaking, which as any language skill generally has to be learned and practiced. However, in practice, it is too often assumed that spoken- language skills can be developed simply by assigning students general topics to discuss or by getting them to talk on certain subjects. Evidently, not enough attention is given to the factors that inhibit or facilitate the production of spoken language. Therefore, in order to provide guidance in developing competent speakers of English, instructors of EFL should keep these questions in mind: What affects adult EFL learners' oral communication? What are the components underlying speaking effectiveness? And how can adult EFL learners' speaking abilities be improved?

Factors Affecting Adult EFL Learners' Oral Communication

Age or maturational constraints. The interactive behavior of EFL learners is influenced by a number of factors. Perhaps age is one of the most commonly cited determinant factors of success or failure in L2 or foreign language learning. Krashen, Long, and Scarcella (1982) argue that acquirers who begin learning a second language in early childhood through natural exposure achieve higher proficiency than those beginning as adults. Oyama's study (1976) also shows that many adults fail to reach native-like proficiency in a second language. Their progress seems to level off at a certain stage, a phenomenon which is usually called "fossilization"-the permanent cessation of second language development. This shows that the aging process itself may affect or limit adult learners' ability to pronounce the target language fluently with native- like pronunciation (Scarcella and Oxford 1992). Even if they can utter words and sentences with perfect pronunciation, problems with prosodic features such as intonation, stress, and other phonological nuances still cause misunderstandings or lead to communication breakdown. Adult learners do not seem to have the same innate language-specific endowment or propensity as children for acquiring fluency and naturalness in spoken language.

Aural medium. The central role of listening comprehension in the L2 or foreign language acquisition process is now largely accepted. And there is little doubt that listening plays an extremely important role in the development of speaking abilities. Speaking feeds on listening, which precedes it. Usually, one person speaks, and the other responds through attending by means of the listening process. In fact, during interaction, every speaker plays a double role-both as a listener and a speaker. "While listening, learners must comprehend the text by retaining information in memory, integrate it with what follows, and continually adjust their understanding of what they hear in the light of prior knowledge and of incoming information" (Mendlsohn and Rubin 1995:35). If one cannot understand what is said, one is certainly unable to respond. So, speaking is closely related or interwoven with listening, which is the basic mechanism through which the rules of language are internalized. The fleetingness of speech, together with the features of spoken English-loosely organized syntax, incomplete forms, false starts, and the use of fillers, undoubtedly hinders EFL learners' comprehension and affects the development of their speaking abilities, as well.

Sociocultural factors. Many cultural characteristics of a language also affect L2 or foreign language learning. From a pragmatic perspective, language is a form of social action because linguistic communication occurs in the context of structured interpersonal exchange, and meaning is thus socially regulated (Dimitracopoulou 1990). In other words, "shared values and beliefs create the traditions and social structures that bind a community together and are expressed in their language" (Carrasquillo 1994:55). Thus, to speak a language, one must know how the language is used in a social context. It is well known that each language has its own rules of usage as to when, how, and to what degree a speaker may impose a given verbal behavior on his/her conversational partner (Berns 1990). Due to the influence or interference of their own cultural norms, it is hard for non-native speakers to choose the forms appropriate to certain situations. For instance, in Chinese culture, paying a compliment to someone obligates that person to give a negative answer such as "No. It is not so good," and so on in order to show "modesty," whereas in North American culture such a response might be both inappropriate and embarrassing.

In addition, oral communication, as mentioned above, involves a very powerful nonverbal communication system, which sometimes contradicts the messages provided through the verbal listening channel. Due to a lack of familiarity with the nonverbal communication system of the target language, EFL learners usually do not know how to pick up nonverbal cues. As a result, ignorance of the nonverbal message often leads to misunderstanding. The following example is a case in point. One day, when a Chinese student heard, "Let's get together for lunch sometime," he immediately responded to fix a specific date without noticing the native speaker's indifferent facial expression. Undoubtedly, he was puzzled when his interlocutor left without giving him an expected answer. It is evident that the student had not understood the nonverbal message, which illustrates that the sociocultural factor is another aspect that affects oral communication greatly.

Affective factors. "The affective side of the learner is probably one of the most important influences on language learning success or failure" (Oxford 1990:140). The affective factors related to L2 or foreign language learning are emotions, self-esteem, empathy, anxiety, attitude, and motivation. L2 or foreign language learning is a complex task that is susceptible to human anxiety (Brown 1994), which is associated with feelings of uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, and apprehension. Speaking a foreign language in public, especially in front of native speakers, is often anxiety-provoking. Sometimes, extreme anxiety occurs when EFL learners become tongue-tied or lost for words in an unexpected situation, which often leads to discouragement and a general sense of failure. Adults, unlike children, are concerned with how they are judged by others. They are very cautious about making errors in what they say, for making errors would be a public display of ignorance, which would be an obvious occasion of "losing face" in some cultures such as in China. Clearly, the sensitivity of adult learners to making mistakes, or fear of "losing face," has been the explanation for their inability to speak English without hesitation.

Components Underlying Speaking Effectiveness

"Language proficiency is not a unidimensional construct but a multifaceted modality, consisting of various levels of abilities and domains (Carrasquillo 1994:65). Hymes (1971) also assumes that L2 learners need to know not only the linguistic knowledge but also the culturally acceptable ways of interacting with others in different situations and relationships. His theory of communicative competence (1971) consists of the interaction of grammatical, psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, and probabilistic language components. Built on Hymes' theory, Canale and Swain (1980) propose that communicative competence includes grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence, which reflect the use of the linguistic system and the functional aspects of communication respectively. In the framework of Canale and Swain (1980), we can show graphically the abilities underlying speaking proficiency.

Grammatical competence. "Grammatical competence is an umbrella concept that includes increasing expertise in grammar (morphology, syntax), vocabulary, and mechanics. With regards to speaking, the term mechanics refers to basic sounds of letters and syllables, pronunciation of words, intonation, and stress" (Scarcella and Oxford 1992:141). In order to convey meaning, EFL learners must have the knowledge of words and sentences; that is, they must understand how words are segmented into various sounds, and how sentences are stressed in particular ways.

Thus, grammatical competence enables speakers to use and understand English language structures accurately and unhesitatingly, which contributes to their fluency.

Discourse competence. In addition to grammatical competence, EFL learners must develop discourse competence, which is concerned with intersentential relationships. In discourse, whether formal or informal, the rules of cohesion and coherence apply, which aid in holding the communication together in a meaningful way. In communication, both the production and comprehension of a language require one's ability to perceive and process stretches of discourse, and to formulate representations of meaning from referents in both previous sentences and following sentences. Therefore, effective speakers should acquire a large repertoire of structures and discourse markers to express ideas, show relationships of time, and indicate cause, contrast, and emphasis (Scarcella and Oxford 1992). With these, learners can manage turn-taking in conversation.

Sociolinguistic competence. Knowledge of language alone does not adequately prepare learners for effective and appropriate use of the target language. Learners must have competence which involves knowing what is expected socially and culturally by users of the target language; that is, learners must acquire the rules and norms governing the appropriate timing and realization of speech acts. Understanding the sociolinguistic side of language helps learners know what comments are appropriate, know how to ask questions during interaction, and know how to respond nonverbally according to the purpose of the talk. Therefore, "adult second language learners must acquire stylistic adaptability in order to be able to encode and decode the discourse around them correctly" (Brown 1994:238).

Strategic competence. Strategic competence, which is "the way learners manipulate language in order to meet communicative goals" (Brown 1994:228), is perhaps the most important of all the communicative competence elements. Simply put, it is the ability to compensate for imperfect knowledge of linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse rules (Berns 1990). With reference to speaking, strategic competence refers to the ability to know when and how to take the floor, how to keep a conversation going, how to terminate the conversation, and how to clear up communication breakdown as well as comprehension problems.

Interaction as the Key to Improving EFL Learners' Speaking Abilities

The functions of spoken language are interactional and transactional. The primary intention of the former is to maintain social relationships, while that of the latter is to convey information and ideas. In fact, much of our daily communication remains interactional. Being able to interact in a language is essential. Therefore, language instructors should provide learners with opportunities for meaningful communicative behavior about relevant topics by using learner-learner interaction as the key to teaching language for communication because "communication derives essentially from interaction" (Rivers 1987:xiii).

Communication in the classroom is embedded in meaning-focused activity. This requires teachers to tailor their instruction carefully to the needs of learners and teach them how to listen to others, how to talk with others, and how to negotiate meaning in a shared context. Out of

interaction, learners will learn how to communicate verbally and nonverbally as their language store and language skills develop. Consequently, the give-and-take exchanges of messages will enable them to create discourse that conveys their intentions in real-life communication.

Small talk. The ability to get along with people in society may correlate somewhat with how well a person can engage in brief, casual conversation with others or an exchange of pleasantries. Talk of weather, rush hour traffic, vocations, and sports events etc., may seem "meaningless," but it functions to create a sense of social communion among peers or other people. So, at the initial stage, adult EFL learners should develop skills in short, interactional exchanges in which they are required to make only one or two utterances at a time, such as:

1. A: I hate rush hour traffic.
B: Me too.
2. A: Boy, the weather is lousy today.
B: Yeah. I hope it'll stop raining.

As the learners get more experience, they will be able to use some of the simple exchanges and know how to open conversations.

Interactive activities. Since most EFL learners learn the target language in their own culture, practice is available only in the classroom. So, a key factor in L2 or foreign language development is the opportunity given to learners to speak in the language-promoting interaction. Teachers must arouse in the learners a willingness and need or reason to speak.

A possible way of stimulating learners to talk might be to provide them with extensive exposure to authentic language through audio-visual stimuli and with opportunities to use the language. Likewise, teachers should integrate strategy instruction into interactive activities, providing a wealth of information about communicative strategies to raise learners' awareness about their own learning styles so that learners can tailor their strategies to the requirements of learning tasks.

In designing activities, teachers should consider all the skills conjointly as they interact with each other in natural behavior, for in real life as in the classroom, most tasks of any complexity involve more than one macro skill (Nunan 1989). Effective interactive activities should be manipulative, meaningful, and communicative, involving learners in using English for a variety of communicative purposes. Specifically, they should (1) be based on authentic or naturalistic source materials; (2) enable learners to manipulate and practice specific features of language; (3) allow learners to rehearse, in class, communicative skills they need in the real world; and (4) activate psycholinguistic processes of learning.

Based on these criteria, the following activities appear to be particularly relevant to eliciting spoken language production. They provide learners with opportunities to learn from auditory and visual experiences, which enable them to develop flexibility in their learning styles and also demonstrate the optimal use of different learning strategies and behaviors for different tasks.

1. *Aural: oral activities.* With careful selection and preparation, aural materials such as news reports on the radio will be fine-tuned to a level accessible to particular groups of learners. These materials can be used in some productive activities as background or as input for interaction. In practice, students are directed to listen to taped dialogues or short passages and afterwards to act them out in different ways. One example which we have used in our micro-teaching practice in Northern Illinois University is jigsaw listening. A story is recorded into several segments on an audio cassette tape. Teachers either have each student listen to a different segment or divide the class into small groups and make each group responsible for one segment. After each student/group has listened to a segment, students are provided with a worksheet of comprehension questions based on the story. Then, students work together in groups on an information gap activity. They negotiate the meaning of the story and answer questions, which motivates students to speak.
2. *Visual: oral activities.* Because of the lack of opportunity in foreign language settings to interact with native speakers, the need for exposure to many kinds of scenes, situations, and accents as well as voices is particularly critical. This need can be met by audiovisual materials such as appropriate films, videotapes, and soap operas. They can provide (a) "the motivation achieved by basing lessons on attractively informative content material; (b) the exposure to a varied range of authentic speech, with different registers, accents, intonation, rhythms, and stresses; and (c) language used in the context of real situations, which adds relevance and interest to the learning process" (Carrasquillo 1994:140). While watching, students can observe what levels of formality are appropriate or inappropriate on given occasions. Similarly, they can notice the nonverbal behavior and types of exclamations and fill-in expressions that are used. Also, they can pay attention to how people initiate and sustain a conversational exchange and how they terminate an interactive episode. Subsequent practice of dialogues, role-playing, and dramatizations will lead to deeper learning.

Visual stimuli can be utilized in several ways as starter material for interaction. Short pieces of films can be used to give "eyewitness" accounts. An anecdote from a movie can be used to elicit opinion-expressing activity.

Likewise, nonverbal videos can be played to have students describe what they have viewed. While watching, students can focus on the content and imitate the "model's" body language. In this way students will be placed in a variety of experiences with accompanying language. Gradually, they will assimilate the verbal and nonverbal messages and communicate naturally.
3. *Material-aided: oral activities.* Appropriate reading materials facilitated by the teacher and structured with comprehension questions can lead to creative production in speech. Story-telling can be prompted with cartoon-strips and sequences of pictures. Oral reports or summaries can be produced from articles in newspapers or from some well designed textbooks such as *Culturally Speaking*, written by Genzel and Cummings (1994). Similar material input such as hotel brochures can be used for making reservations; menus can be used for making purchases in the supermarket or for ordering in a restaurant. In fact, language input for oral activities can be derived from a wide range of sources that form the basis for communicative tasks of one sort or another, which will help learners deal with real situations that they are likely to encounter in the future.

4. *Culture-awareness: oral activities.* Culture plays an instrumental role in shaping speakers' communicative competence, which is related to the appropriate use of language (e.g., how native speakers make an apology and what kind of form the apology is to take). Generally, appropriateness is determined by each speech community. In other words, it is defined by the shared social and cultural conventions of a particular group of speakers. Therefore, it is essential to recognize different sets of culturally determined rules in communication. Just as Brown and Yule (1983:40) say, "a great number of cultural assumptions which would be normally presupposed, and not made explicit by native speakers, may need to be drawn explicitly to the attention of speakers from other cultures." Cultural learning illustrated by activities and strengthened through physical enactment will motivate students.

Teachers can present situations in which there are cultural misunderstandings that cause people to become offended, angry, and confused. Then, thought-provoking information and questions can follow each description or anecdote for in-class discussion. Students can be asked to analyze and determine what went wrong and why, which will force students to think about how people in the target culture act and perceive things, and which will inevitably provide a deeper insight into that culture. This kind of exercise can strike a healthy balance between the necessity of teaching the target culture and validating the students' native culture, which will gradually sharpen students' culture awareness.

By and large, using audiovisual stimuli brings sight, hearing, and kinesthetic participation into interplay, which gets students across the gulf of imagination into the "real experience" in the first place. Meanwhile, the task-oriented activities give students a purpose to talk. Ideally, the flexibility and adaptability of these activities are essential if the communicative needs of learners are to be met. With the limited time available in class, it is necessary to follow open language experiences with more intensive structured situations, dialogues, and role-playing activities. These will give students both the chance and confidence actually to use the language.

In conclusion, speaking is one of the central elements of communication. In EFL teaching, it is an aspect that needs special attention and instruction. In order to provide effective instruction, it is necessary for teachers of EFL to carefully examine the factors, conditions, and components that underlie speaking effectiveness. Effective instruction derived from the careful analysis of this area, together with sufficient language input and speech-promotion activities, will gradually help learners speak English fluently and appropriately.

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